

Improving Quality and Increasing Access to Food Stamp Participation: The San Francisco County Experience

IRENE CHAVEZ

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alameda County has always taken a positive approach to providing excellent customer service. With this in mind, it is imperative to continue finding new ways to improve on service delivery.

There is a lot to be learned from San Francisco County regarding outreach efforts of the food stamp program. However, geographically there is a 691 square mile difference between San Francisco and Alameda Counties, Alameda County being the larger. This size difference contributes to not being able to have the same success in each county.

Some outreach efforts used in San Francisco County have either been used, or are currently being used, in Alameda County. They vary slightly but are very similar. It is important to learn outreach strategies from another county and perhaps implement some in a way that is beneficial to Alameda County.

One recommendation that has already been tried in Alameda County in the past, and should be re-instated in a more productive way, is the Service Counter/Window. It would enable clients in Alameda County to get served within the first few minutes of coming into the office. This would reduce the repeated amount of attempts to contact a staff member for assistance and provide staff with fewer interruptions.

It is recommended that Alameda County take advantage of the resources and technologies that are available and implement any changes that would continue to provide the excellent customer service to their clients and community.

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The task of each family is also the task of all humanity. This is to cherish the living, remember those who have gone before and prepare for those who are not yet born.

—Margaret Mead (Engraved on the outside of a San Francisco County Social Services Building)

Introduction

San Francisco County has an outreach program that involves not only its employees, community-based organizations, and private industry but many citizens who volunteer their time for the well-being of strangers. San Francisco's Department of Human Services has three non-assistance Food Stamp offices and one public assistance Food Stamp office. There are 135 Food Stamp employees, and there were 13,862 Food Stamp cases in June 2005. The model used in San Francisco County is "Building Food Security with Food Stamps." This model demonstrates the following:

- Food Stamps improve food security and nutritional quality while maintaining consumer choice.
- Increased food security improves ability to work and learn productivity.
- Improved maternal food security decreases maternal and infant mortality rates.

In addition to presenting how San Francisco County reaches out to the community, I am going to provide data, statistics and information on the success of San Francisco's Project Homeless Connect.

Background

There are many complexities which San Francisco County felt would prevent customers from applying

for Food Stamps. Some of the strategies for addressing these problems were:

- Opening up the access to the Food Stamp Program.
- Expanding the resources by using community and faith-based organizations to assist with the Food Stamp application process.
- Educating the community partners and faith-based organizations about all available resources.
- Erasing the stigma of getting Food Stamps by coming to the Human Resources office.
- Reducing the time it takes to get Food Stamps. Second Harvest conducted a study that showed, on the average, it took 5 hours and 2 office visits to get Food Stamps.
- Educating community service providers to the notion that their clientele may also be eligible for food stamps.
- Taking advantage of technology by finding better ways to serve the clients.

San Francisco put together some innovations that they felt would increase Food Stamp applications and provide the community with better access to all available services.

Descriptions of the Innovations Used by San Francisco County

FOOD STAMPS IN A DAY

Food Stamps in a Day was designed to bring Food Stamps to the community more efficiently.

Six eligibility workers go to St. Anthony's dining hall during the mid-day meal to process Food Stamp applications. Volunteers help clients complete their applications. Food Stamps are approved on site by using laptop computers to clear clients and process their

applications. The finger-imaging requirement is waived due to the nature of an out-of-the-office interview. Eligibility workers interview at least 50 clients per week. This format is used every other month.

The benefits for this program are:

- **Time**—Clients never have to visit a Food Stamps office.
- **Trust**—Clients enroll at an organization that they trust.
- **Efficiency**—Most interviewees are eligible (approximately 80%).
- **Sustainability**—St. Anthony's spreads food security while keeping numbers down by promoting Food Stamps.

Similar outreach is done at selected Drug Rehabilitation Centers. Two workers visit 3 primary locations, 3 times per week to assist with applications and do on-the-spot interviews. Forty new clients per week are signed up using this method.

RESTAURANT MEALS

Since March 2003 San Francisco County has had a pilot program which enabled the homeless, disabled, and elderly food stamp households to use food stamp benefits in order to purchase meals at participating restaurants. On May 21, 2004 an "All County Information Notice" was sent to all county welfare directors and Food Stamp coordinators allowing counties to implement this restaurant meals program. In San Francisco County, 4,400 participants were certified in this program and are now able to have a hot meal. Twenty restaurants in San Francisco now accept EBT cards and almost \$1,000,000 worth of meals were provided in the first two years. A Food Stamp Analyst monitors the establishments and the customers who use their EBT cards at the participating restaurants.

FARMER'S MARKET

There are 12 locations for farmer's markets within the city where clients can use their EBT cards to purchase healthy foods. The customer takes their EBT card to a manager at the farmer's markets who will swipe the card and issue tokens. The customer can then purchase fresh fruits and vegetables. Use of

farmers markets enables the food stamp customer to have more choices for the foods they eat.

COUNTER B—CUSTOMER SERVICE COUNTER

San Francisco County has a walk-up counter in their office's that is solely to provide good customer service without having to wait a long time. At this window the customer can get Food Stamp information, assistance with forms, EBT replacement cards, temporary ID's, and other non-eligibility functions. The window consists of two (three during the busy days) intake eligibility workers each in the AM and PM. During their time at the counter workers do not process intake applications. In March 2006 the counter had 948 visits; 271 temporary ID's and 746 EBT cards were issued. In addition, 229 customers returned to request that the county replace previously replaced EBT cards. There were also 150 questions answered at the counter. For replacement EBT cards, no paperwork is used. Cards are embossed in Cal-WIN directly to the counter for pick-up. This saves time for staff and the client.

PROJECT HOMELESS CONNECT (PROGRAM THAT OFFERS SERVICES TO THE HOMELESS)

On October 13, 2004 Mayor Gavin Newsom kicked off his project concept with a walk through the Tenderloin with a handful of participants and street counselors, unsure what they had to offer homeless people, or just how to give it. He wanted city workers to get out from behind their desks in order to help the people where they live. By the end of the day, they had placed 24 people into shelters. Today, through the dedication and commitment of thousands of volunteers, San Franciscans have shown that they are what makes' Project Homeless Connect work. The goals of Project Homeless Connect are three-fold:

- 1 To improve access to services for homeless San Franciscans.
- 2 To engage and increase the involvement of the business, non-profit community, and individual volunteers to work together to provide access to services for homeless San Franciscans.
- 3 To leverage private, corporate and foundation monies as well as in-kind support to augment

city efforts to increase housing options and build service capacity for homeless San Franciscans.

In order to fulfill these goals, Project Homeless Connect has gathered as many homeless people as they can and provided them with services such as medical treatment, substance abuse, mental health counseling, legal service and signing them up for Food Stamps, and other giveaways.

Statistics that were accumulated for Project Homeless Connect (February 16, 2003) are:

- Total clients served: 1,792
- Total clients seen at Medical: 233
- Total clients seen at Dental: 240
- Total clients seen for Behavioral Health (Detox, maintenance, substance abuse residential treatment & mental health): 9
- SSI Advocacy: 150
- Employment Services: 121
- DMV ID Services: 124
- Massages: 54
- Foot Care: 52
- Free Phone Calls: 506
- Food donated by the food bank: 20,537 lbs
- 113 individuals who were sleeping on the street Wednesday night were indoors Thursday night.

San Francisco County's Project Homeless Connect consists of over 1,500 volunteers some of whom prepare on a monthly basis to bring services to the homeless every two months. Some of sub-committees are:

Street Outreach—The homeless are contacted in a supportive way and encouraged to come to this event so they can receive the services that is available to them.

Client Support Services—Volunteers act as guides, giving direction and escorting clients to the areas to get what is needed: food, services, and other appointments.

Triage—Volunteers, mostly trained social work/social services providers, greet clients explain and obtain clients' signed authorization for sharing information, and take clients through a structured set of questions. This identifies how to best assist individuals.

Food—The Connect Café, a mini-restaurant, serves meals to Project Homeless Connect clients. Over 1,000 meals were served in February. Volunteers in the café include hosts, waiters, food prep volunteers, and people to bus the tables.

Activities Center—Integral to the process of connecting client with services is providing a suitable atmosphere while they wait for assistance. These activities include; free phone calls, massages, wheel chair repair, foot cleaning, reading material, and art activities.

Transportation—Volunteers needed to assist drivers and take dispatch orders from the transportation coordinators and people who have a van or other vehicle. Also needed are those who can assist with locating transportation for the clients.

Date Entry/Discharge—The discharge area is the final stop before obtaining any giveaway items, from hygiene kits, to clothing, to food items. It is an opportunity to insure that people obtained what they came for, what they may need, or just to say thank you.

Pre-Event Volunteers—Volunteers are needed during the week and on weekends prior to the big event to packaging hygiene kits, phone work, or volunteer outreach.

Medical—Medical professionals are needed to provide medical services.

Clothing Donations—New clothing, especially new sweatshirts and socks, are needed.

Project Homeless Connect Results as Viewed by Others

This project has attracted so much notice that representatives of 30 cities from New York and Chicago to Los Angeles and Sacramento have come to check out the past few gatherings, and on December 8, 2005 these cities simultaneously began identical events of their own in tandem with San Francisco's eighth Connect event. Phillip Mangano, the Executive Director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, coordinated a nationwide outreach in December, 2005. Mr. Mangano said of the day, "National Project Homeless Connect Day is an in-

novative opportunity to fuse political and social will to generate visible and quantifiable change on your streets and in your neighborhoods.” Twenty six cities across the nation emulated San Francisco County’s efforts on December 8, 2005. Some of the cities included Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, New York, Philadelphia, Portland, San Jose, San Juan PR, San Diego, Miami, and Los Angeles.

Conclusion

In visiting with San Francisco County and participating in their outreach efforts to increase the Food Stamp Program’s applications, it is obvious that there are many lessons to be learned. Most impressive was the Project Homeless Connect program, and for that reason there is much detail on it in this report. Additionally, our neighbors, Santa Clara County, are now preparing for their 2nd Project Homeless Connect on April 27, 2006. Our other neighbors, Contra Costa County, have started to broach the idea with elected officials, planning councils, and others, seeking input and support. It is wonderful to know that Alameda County has also started the Project Homeless Connect. By spreading the word and seeking a wider volunteer base this program can only get better.

Recommendations

Not all programs being used in San Francisco County would be beneficial to Alameda County. The following programs are considered:

FOOD STAMPS IN A DAY

This program may not be feasible in Alameda County for the following reasons:

- San Francisco encompasses 46.7 square miles, whereas Alameda County encompasses 737.7 square miles.
- There are 45 different food banks in Alameda County. In San Francisco County most clients go to one location (St. Anthony’s), therefore staff only need to go to one place in San Francisco County.

This program is not recommended at this time.

RESTAURANT MEALS

This component would enable our clients, who do not have access to kitchen facilities, to have a hot meal. It is recommended that Alameda County explore the possibility of implementing this program.

FARMER’S MARKETS

While this is a wonderful program in San Francisco County it may not be as beneficial in Alameda County. In San Francisco you can go to a Farmer’s Market on almost any day. In Alameda County most are on weekends only and then they are far and few between. This program is not recommended at this time.

CUSTOMER SERVICE COUNTER

It is imperative that some type of informational window or counter be available to the clients of Alameda County. It is a disservice to have customers come into an office and not receive excellent customer service. To staff this window/counter, all units of ET’s (II’s & III’s) could be assigned a week each, on a rotating basis, to cover the window in half day increments. This means each ET would have to be at the window/counter for a minimum of ½ day or a maximum of 2½ days every 3 months. The time they invest at the window would be minimal in comparison to the time they would save by their clients utilizing the window/counter. Perhaps the ET could be located in the area where district clients go for assistance (formally CCU). All staff and clients could benefit in the following ways:

- ET’s voice mail would not fill up with messages from someone in the waiting room needing ID or an EBT card.
- ET’s would not have to stop what they are doing to complete a form and deliver it to the data input clerk.
- Phone calls would decrease for simple eligibility questions.
- Clerical staff could direct clients to the counter/window instead of trying to find someone to help a client who is in need of immediate assistance.

- Supervisors would get fewer phone calls from the phone center, index and waiting room staff.
- Clients would not have to wait a long time to have something which should take such a short time.
- If staff takes advantage of the technology that is available to them (CalWIN), EBT cards could be issued in a matter of minutes.

Perhaps a pilot program could be conducted to see if having this window/counter would benefit staff and customers in Alameda County.

PROJECT HOMELESS CONNECT

On April 21, 2006, Project Homeless Connect: A One-Stop Homeless Services Fair, was held in Alameda County at the St. Vincent de Paul Center. It is exciting to know that Alameda County has also joined such a wonderful endeavor and the citizens of Alameda County will have the opportunity to also give back to their community. If Alameda County Social Services Agency adopted some of these recommendations, it would complement our customer focus and help continue the positive traits already alive in our agency.

